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### Deposited in DRO:

07 December 2020

### Version of attached file:

Published Version

### Peer-review status of attached file:

Peer-reviewed

### Citation for published item:

Byram, M. (2020) 'Applied linguist, ethnographer, international(ist) citizen - perspectives on the language learner.', *Status Quaestionis: language, text, culture.*, 19 . pp. 95-108.

### Further information on publisher's website:

<https://doi.org/10.13133/2239-1983/17141>

### Publisher's copyright statement:

### Additional information:

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## ‘Applied Linguist’, ‘Ethnographer’, International(ist) Citizen - Perspectives on the Language Learner

### Abstract

In this article, I consider three ways of envisioning the language learner, and the disciplines or theories on which they are based. The language learner as ‘applied linguist’ suggests that learners and their teachers draw on linguistic analyses of the language they are learning/teaching. To see the language learner as ‘ethnographer’ means to include the skills, knowledge and attitudes of ethnography in what is taught/learnt. The language learner as international/intercultural citizen needs to take into account insights from both citizenship education and internationalism, a counterforce to nationalism and chauvinism, which language teaching is well-placed to support.

In pursuing these three possible visions of the language learner the crucial criterion is that language learning should have educational value and respond to contemporary societal conditions.

### 1. Introduction

From the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the ‘turn-around’ of language teaching and learning encapsulated in Viëtor’s (1882) famous call - *der Sprachunterricht muss umkehren* - the language learner was expected to aspire to be a native speaker. Only in recent decades has this begun to change. In this article, I propose to trace changes, not in an historical analysis but in conceptual terms, by comparing and contrasting different role-models language learners have been offered, sometimes simultaneously, sometimes consecutively.

My analysis is not historical but ideological, for I have a personal and specific view of which role-model is preferable.

As my title suggests, I shall begin with the language learners as 'applied linguist' and then move to the 'ethnographer' and the international(ist) citizen. Particularly in the third section, I will argue that language teaching should take into account its place within the purposes of general education and, in particular, how it can help to counter-act the extremist nationalism in contemporary societies.

## 2. 'Applied Linguist'

The language learner as 'applied linguist' is set in quotation marks because it is not to be taken literally. Language learners are not in a strict sense applied linguists, but this label makes evident that they are expected to use knowledge about language supplied by scholars in linguistics or 'linguisticians'<sup>6</sup>, and change it into knowledge how to use the language for communicative purposes. This is not simply another way of referring to 'communicative language teaching' since other methods or approaches - be they 'grammar-translation' or 'audio-lingual' or 'direct' etc. - had and have communicative goals. 'Grammar-translation' is communicative in that it led and leads to the ability to read texts written by native speakers, often literary or philosophical texts and often from both past and present. This is one kind of communication. Similar but more complex purposes, with additional communicative competences, are the intended outcomes of other approaches such as 'direct method', and include the three other 'skills' of speaking, listening and writing, but the communicative purpose of reading remains equally important.

Knowledge about language is supplied by linguisticians for teachers who change it into knowledge useful to learners and, in the course of learning that knowledge, learners are often expected to acquire some of the skills of linguisticians themselves. They become

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<sup>6</sup> This is a clumsy word but needed to distinguish such scholars from 'linguists' i.e. people who study specific languages.

not just 'linguists', students and users of specific languages, but students of language. They might consider this to be unnecessary or at best a necessary pre-condition for using language with accuracy. Knowledge about language is often not attractive to learners, and at best seen as a 'necessary evil'. On the other hand, the concept of 'language awareness' sees knowledge about language as a virtue, as a valuable acquisition in itself (Hawkins 1984; Donmall 1985; Garrett and Cots 2012). The argument is that, since language is the main distinguishing feature of being human, it is a worthwhile educational aim that learners should know about themselves as linguistic beings. For, otherwise, they will not become aware of their implicit knowledge of their existing language(s), let alone the languages they learn. Their knowledge about their existing language(s) is over-shadowed, and even suppressed, by their knowledge how to use those languages. The fact that they have a capacity which is extremely complex - just as complex as the phenomena of the natural world they learn to wonder at - does not occur to them because everyone has it. If everyone has it, then it must be simple. The complexity of their language capacity might be more widely recognised - just as physics and chemistry etc. are recognised - if there were a Nobel Prize for discoveries in linguistics.

'Knowing how', or procedural knowledge, thus dominates declarative knowledge or learners' knowledge about their existing language(s). If the value of 'language awareness' is ignored, procedural knowledge of a new language is also prioritised over declarative knowledge. Teachers often also support this prioritisation because the transfer from declarative to procedural knowledge has been cast in doubt (Véronique 2012) as the speaking and listening skills have been prioritised over reading and writing.

That declarative knowledge is useful in writing (and reading) whether in a learners' existing or new language(s), is evident enough, because with time to revise and reflect, it helps to refine and improve written production and/or to improve interpretation of written texts. It is more controversial to say that declarative

knowledge can also improve speaking and listening. The argument that fluency is as important - or perhaps more important - than accuracy has long been well and justifiably made (Brumfit 1984). Over-emphasis on accuracy (declarative knowledge) impedes fluency (procedural knowledge) especially in the early stages of learning a new language. On the other hand, at advanced stages - whether in existing or new languages - fluency can be enhanced by declarative knowledge when fluency becomes not just the ability to communicate efficiently - to convey meaning - but also the ability to communicate effectively: to express nuances of meaning, to be rhetorically effective in both writing and speaking.

In short, the language learner needs to have some of the skills and knowledge of an applied linguist whether they want to take a native speaker as a role model or not. For the question of a native speaker as a role model is a different matter and, indeed, an 'applied linguist' is more able to decide for themselves, since they will understand the issues more clearly through their knowledge about, or awareness of, language and human beings and their societies as linguistic phenomena.

### 3. 'Ethnographer'

'Ethnographer' too should not be taken literally. The language learner as ethnographer is not a replacement for the 'applied linguist', but an enrichment. Among language teachers, the enrichment of Chomsky's concept of language competence by Hymes's 'communicative competence' (1972) is well known, and captures at least in broad terms the point I want to make in this section.

Hymes and, in Europe, van Ek (1986) demonstrated that communication can be neither efficient nor rhetorically effective if based solely on language competence. For learners have in their existing language(s) not just linguistic but also sociolinguistic and

cultural competence, the former being a part of the latter. In practice, when Hymes's ideas about existing languages were transferred into teaching learners new languages, more emphasis was put, in so-called 'communicative language teaching', on sociolinguistic than on cultural competence. Similarly, the use of van Ek's analysis for the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (Council of Europe 2001) put more emphasis on sociolinguistic than on social and cultural competences. Hymes in particular was often mis-understood despite his saying that cultural competence is more than sociolinguistic competence.

The role-model which captures this new complexity is the ethnographer. Children are born ethnographers and use their ethnographic skills to explore the world around them - by observation and questioning - and decide how to respond to it. The vast majority 'go native' and become not 'participant observers' but 'participants' in the world around them, and subsequently lose their ethnographic skills and declarative knowledge as their procedural knowledge takes over. Analogously to the re-discovery of their knowledge about language through learning new languages, learners can re-acquire ethnographic skills and declarative as well as procedural knowledge about new worlds they meet through new languages. They can simultaneously turn these skills back onto their existing worlds and, again in an analogy with language awareness, teachers should encourage this as an educational outcome.

Unlike the child-ethnographer, the professional ethnographer does not usually 'go native'. They maintain their position as participant observer and fulfil their task of presenting and interpreting the world of a human social group - be it an isolated group in the Amazon or the Pacific, or a group which constitutes a social institution (a school, hospital, commercial company etc.) in their own society - to their readers in an 'ethnography', as a written report or by other means.

The language learner as ethnographer can follow this lead. They can become an interpreter of a new world they experience through a

new language for those they know in their existing world(s) and language(s). They can do this simultaneously both for others and for themselves. Through heuristic comparison and contrast, through reflection and analysis, they can understand a new world and better understand their own, and this will make them better communicators in both (Byram 1997).

Comparison and contrast, and the ability to investigate more deeply what they do not understand, can - and in my view should - lead to learners to curiosity and an ability to decentre and challenge what they have hitherto assumed to be 'normal' and 'natural'. They can, and in an educational perspective of self-knowledge, they *should* become critical and gain 'critical cultural awareness', i.e. 'an ability to evaluate critically and on the basis of a systematic process of reasoning, values present in one's own and other' worlds. (Byram forthcoming). At this point, the ethnographer becomes not just a participant-observer but an engaged commentator on other worlds and their own.

Some ethnographers take a particular interest in language. Michael Agar with *inter alia* his concepts of 'rich points' and 'languaculture' (1991, 1994a, 1994b) has been introduced into the discourse on language and culture teaching, notably by Risager (2006) who uses the concept of 'languaculture' or 'linguaculture' in her analysis of the language-culture nexus. Language learner ethnographers too can focus on the rich points which reveal the differences - and learning difficulties - between their own language(s) and new languages. For, the world(s) learners know is/are embodied in and accessible through their language(s) existing and new, and semantic analysis will help them to notice and integrate rich points in the language-culture nexus into their own learning.

The issues become all the more fascinating - and with good pedagogy can be made fascinating as part of learners' language awareness - when they learn a lingua franca. Are the 'rich points' from learners existing languages transferred into the shared

language? Neither Agar nor Risager address this directly, and there is room for more research, as well as opportunity for imaginative pedagogy.

There is no doubt that this vision of the language learner as (linguistic) ethnographer - appropriately realised according to the age, context and stage of learning - is a challenge to teachers. Teachers themselves are usually 'applied linguists' and may even have been trained as 'pure' linguists. Including the skills and knowledge of ethnography is a different matter and requires an additional commitment, but one which can be embraced (Roberts et al. 2001).

In sum, the language learners as ethnographer is a concept which enables learners to gain declarative and procedural knowledge with which they can analyse and reflect in new ways and, in using all their communicative skills, be a participant-observer in other worlds and their own, and act as mediators between the two. They are 'intercultural speakers' (Byram 2009) who may decide to pursue the linguistic competences of a native speaker, but who will certainly pursue the competences of the mediating ethnographer with respect to (inter)cultural competences.

#### 4 International(ist) Citizen

In this section I do not need to use quotation marks around international(ist) citizen, but there are other preliminary explanations necessary. The distinction between 'international' and 'internationalist' is important. The former is a descriptive term and the latter prescriptive because it includes values. The former refers to the ways in which a learner needs to be a mediating ethnographer or intercultural speaker if they are to be an efficient and effective communicator. The latter refers to the ideological position I think a learner should take in their critical thinking and actions. I might



have chosen to write 'intercultural and/or internationalist citizen'. The precise meaning of 'internationalist' will become clear below.

A learner with critical cultural awareness is an engaged thinker, reflecting on their own and other worlds. Thinking may lead to action; critique of (an aspect of) the world, whether one's own or another, may be the first step towards taking action to reinforce what is 'good' and change what is 'bad'. It is possible for this step to be taken in any context, but in an educational context the teacher may encourage the learner to do so. This introduces complex ethical issues and responsibilities, as any pedagogical decision does. Some language teachers may be reluctant to take on such responsibilities, but in some views of education for citizenship, encouraging learners to be active citizens is normal practice (e.g. Mirral and Morrelle 2011).

Education for citizenship is usually focused on learners' own world(s) as experienced in their existing language(s). In the teaching of new languages, the focus broadens to include other worlds as well as one's own. In education for citizenship in one's own world, the values and actions are usually those which are 'normal' and 'natural' in that world. In language teaching for 'intercultural citizenship' (Byram 2008), the values may be new, perhaps even in conflict with the existing 'natural' and 'normal'. A new concept of normal and natural is required.

One set of values, and the actions which realise them, are 'internationalist'. Other value-sets may be drawn from religions or philosophies. My view is that, because language teaching usually introduces language and worlds rooted in other countries, the appropriate values are internationalist, but this is not the only reason for my view. Internationalism has been an antidote to (extreme) nationalism or patriotism - the last refuge of a scoundrel, as Samuel Johnson said (as cited in Boswell 1986, 182) - almost from its inception. Nationalism is dangerous and, as I write this, is becoming more so. It has led to conflict in the past and threatens to do so again. Internationalism is necessary today as much as ever.

Internationalism is a complex phenomenon which has been under-researched by historians (Kuehl 2009) but for my purposes here, it is 'liberal internationalism' which is important, defined by Halliday as: "a generally optimistic approach based upon the belief that independent societies and autonomous individuals can through greater interaction and co-operation evolve towards common purposes, chief among these being peace and prosperity." (1988, 192).

Holbraad too links liberal internationalism with "confidence in the rational and moral qualities of human beings" (2003, 39) and "faith in progress towards more orderly social relations." The language learner who espouses internationalist values thus engages, often with the encouragement of their teacher, in co-operation to achieve shared objectives (Porto 2014; Yulita 2017).

The language learner as internationalist does not replace the 'applied linguist' nor the 'ethnographer'. The knowledge and skills of both - and especially the critical cultural awareness of the ethnographer - are important and fundamental for the internationalist learner. In practice, the learner can use their applied linguist and ethnographer competences to work with other internationalists who speak other languages in the common pursuit of internationalist values and actions. Using contemporary technologies and the instruments of globalisation, learners can act together with learners in other geographical locations, in their own country or abroad, to reinforce what they together see as 'good' and change together the 'bad'. In doing so they acquire new internationalist identities (Byram *et al.* 2017).

The introduction of values and judgements about the 'good' and the 'bad' sets new challenges for language teachers. The ethical issues involved in encouraging learners to act internationally as intercultural citizens have to be addressed by teachers who promote internationalist values. The challenges must not be under-estimated and the implications for teacher education are substantial, but cannot be the focus here.

## 5. Conclusion: language learning and Bildung

On a number of occasions above, I have referred to the 'educational' context and purposes of language learning. I have had in mind throughout that languages are, most often, learnt in schools and higher education as part of general education. Other contexts of learning exist but are outside the range of this article.

The German concept of *Bildung* and similar concepts of *dannelse* and *bildning* in Scandinavia, provides a good basis for further clarification. *Bildung* refers both to the realisation of a learner's potential as an individual, their inner self, and also to the influence of outside factors which facilitate this development. These factors, in schools and universities, include teaching but also other activities across whole institutions and their formal and informal curricula.

In terms of the 'applied linguist' and the 'ethnographer', the learner's potential - drawn upon in early childhood but then 'forgotten' as their skills and knowledge become 'second nature' - can be re-stimulated by what teachers do. This is the element of *Bildung* which focuses on the realisation of an individual's potential. The internationalist citizen, by contrast, is an external concept, created in society, into which the learner can be encouraged to grow, to acquire new identities and new ways of seeing the multiple worlds into which, over time, learners enter through the language they learn. Declarative and procedural knowledge are necessary but should not be the sole focus of teachers' attention. Language learning should be a path to *Bildung* and teachers have a responsibility to facilitate *Bildung* whichever subject they teach. Language teachers are no exception and make their contribution from their specific international perspective and, I have argued, through internationalist values they are well-placed to embrace, provided they have appropriate teacher education.

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